

Remarks of The Honorable Henry J. Hyde
Before the Full Committee
Hearing on “Avian Flu: Addressing the Global Threat”
Wednesday, December 7, 2005

On the morning of March 11, 1918, while World War I was raging overseas, a young private reported to the infirmary at Fort Riley, Kansas complaining of a headache, sore throat, and fever. By noon, more than 100 other servicemen were hospitalized, a number that swelled to 500 by week’s end. Although no one knew it at the time, it was the beginning of the great influenza pandemic of 1918, which caused tens of millions of deaths around the world, infected one-quarter of the U.S. population, and killed over 600,000 Americans – more than all the wars of the Twentieth Century combined.

Since the so-called “Spanish Flu” pandemic of 1918, there have been two others of lesser magnitude: the Asian Flu pandemic in 1957 and the Hong Kong Flu pandemic in 1968. Many experts believe that we are overdue for another one.

It is not clear that humanity is any less vulnerable than we were during the last century. Indeed, the same currents of progress that have improved our capacity to fight disease also have enhanced its ability to spread. International travel and commerce, which have brought us so many benefits, also increase our shared vulnerabilities.

The flu strain that has been the focus of so much recent attention – the H5N1 virus – is already endemic to vast poultry and bird populations, particularly in Southeast Asia. If, or, as some insist, when, the virus mutates into a form easily transmitted between people, the effect on

human health will be explosive. In contrast to the mortality rate in the 1918 epidemic, which was somewhere around two and a half percent, more than half of those infected with H5N1 have died, including the young and fit. So far, we have been spared a pandemic by chance and the inefficiencies of viral mutation. We cannot responsibly depend on those uncertainties for our future protection.

Because infected people are contagious before they display visible symptoms, and migratory birds do not carry passports, an avian flu pandemic cannot be halted at our airports, borders, or customs checkpoints. It is a global threat that requires proactive, international attention. For that reason, it is a key concern of this Committee.

I applaud the President for assembling the *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza* to help catalyze Federal, state, local, and private planning to meet the pandemic threat. I strongly agree with its assertion that “[t]he most effective way to protect the American population is to contain an outbreak beyond the borders of the U.S.”

However, given the unprecedented dangers we face, the 3.5 percent of the President’s \$7.1 billion emergency funding request earmarked for pandemic influenza might not be adequate to this task.

I am confident that the panel of distinguished witnesses before us today will apprise us of our efforts to detect and combat avian flu outbreaks and help us to better comprehend the level of

financial and other resources we will need if we are to annihilate on distant shores the forces of a devastating and pitiless invasion that even now are massing for an assault.

Let me now turn to my friend and esteemed colleague, Mr. Lantos, the Ranking Democratic Member of this Committee, for any remarks he may wish to make.
